

# Many Shades of 'Woman': Patriarchy and Gender Relations in Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage*

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## Abstract

South Asian literature, referring to the works of writers from the Indian subcontinent and its diaspora, has received much attention and acclaim notwithstanding the area's history of colonial subjugation and cultural repression. Literature, in any part of the world, has customarily privileged a male-centric tradition of writing. But in the recent years, many South Asian women writers have made their mark on the literary scene. Most of their works present a nuanced portrayal of women and their lived experience. This paper focuses on the delineation of women, their lives and interpersonal relationships in *Arranged Marriage* (1995), a collection of eleven short stories by Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni. Divakaruni, a famed Indo-American writer, had co-founded Maitri, a helpline for the victims of domestic abuse. Her experiences translated into this debut collection of stories which has won the American Book Award and PEN Josephine Miles Award. Arranged marriage, a profoundly patriarchal concept, is a prevalent practice in the Indian subcontinent. It denies women the right to choose their partner and obligates them to submit to the 'better judgment' of their family. The stories differ in plot and narratorial voice, but a common theme runs through them – that of women's struggle for autonomy and identity within the constricting patriarchal framework of the society. A plethora of female characters – housewives, widows, young girls, prostitutes – enrich the narrative. Divakaruni, a part of the Indian diaspora, problematizes the immigrant experience, especially that of women from Kolkata. The stories foreground a range of issues, from dysfunctional marriage and abusive husbands to women desiring education and employment. A comprehensive analysis of each story and the underlying theme would illuminate the problems that many South Asian women still grapple with.

Commenting on the writer's job, Jeanette Winterson had once remarked that writers are not here to conform but to challenge. This is especially true in the case of women writers as they seek to articulate the distinctly female experience from the perspective of the female consciousness itself. This verbalization of the personal experiences of women is a political act as it challenges the largely monolithic patriarchal discourse; as the second wave feminist dictum states – 'the personal is political'. Divakaruni has lived in India till 1976, after which she had emigrated to the United States. She lives in Texas with her family and is the Betty and Gene McDavid Professor of Creative Writing in the University of Houston. She is on the advisory board of two organizations- Maitri in San Francisco and Daya in Houston- that help South Asian or South Asian American women who are victims of domestic violence and abuse. She is a bestselling author and several of her novels have won prestigious awards. Her works encompass a variety of genres including historical fiction, realistic fiction, magical realism and fantasy. She writes for adults as

well as for children. In many of her works, she describes the immigrant experience—especially that of Indian women from Kolkata—and one can observe partially autobiographical elements in them. In *Arranged Marriage* (1995) also, Divakaruni's heroines struggle to steer a middle course between the traditional Indian culture and modern America, and find themselves liberated and trapped at the same time. Neither India nor America receive a romantic treatment at Divakaruni's hands. She, in fact, shows that the condition of Indian women does not improve much in America.

Carole Pateman, in *The Sexual Contract* (1988), states, "Marriage is a long-term social relationship between the sexes, in which, in return for protection from a husband, a wife gives obedience. Men gain material psychological benefits from her subjection." In the context of the Indian subcontinent, the forces of modernity have failed to bring about much transformation in the realm of marriage, which continues to be a deeply patriarchal institution sustaining itself by the unequal power relations between men and women. Adrienne Rich in 'The Kingdom of Fathers' remarks that patriarchy is the "power of the fathers, a familial, social, ideological, political system in which men, by force, direct pressure or through ritual, tradition, law... determine what part women shall or shall not play and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male." In *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni presents a bleak landscape in which her female characters struggle for personal autonomy and self-identity within the constricting male paradigm.

The first story in the collection is 'The Bats'. It focusses on the issue of domestic violence. Divakaruni has interestingly employed the narrative point of view of a little girl who does not directly describe her father beating her mother, but observes various marks on her mother's body turning blue and purple. The story is set in India where the mother is a housewife, thankful for her husband providing "food and rent money" for her even though she is often beaten up by him. The story shows how women who lack financial independence are trapped in abusive relationships with little possibility of escape. When one day the mother decides to leave, the narrator wonders how she will manage to buy a train ticket as she didn't have enough money and when she asked for it from her husband, he would fly into "one of his rages". We also see that many women, like the mother, fearing social stigma accept their fate and do not want to leave their husbands for good. The mother is safe at the grandfather's village, yet she reaches out to her husband because she couldn't stand the "stares and whispers of the women" in the marketplace and the "loneliness of being without him". Her plight is poignantly compared to that of the bats that keep coming to the mango orchard even though they are eventually poisoned by the grandfather. What the grandfather says about the bats is also true for the mother – "They don't realize that by flying somewhere else they'll be safe. Or maybe they do, but there's something that keeps pulling them back here."

The story 'Clothes' is quite different from 'The Bats'. It is set in both India and America and presents a strong-willed woman, Sumita, as the narrator. She has loving parents and a kind and considerate husband, Somesh. Her in-laws also treat her well. But her blissful life is shattered when Somesh is murdered and she becomes a young widow. Somesh wanted her to attend college and eventually become a teacher, but she dreams of working in his 7-Eleven store. After Somesh's death, her in-laws decide to return to India with her, but she resolves to stay in America and work in the store, although the "dangerous land" terrifies her. She determinedly prepares herself to face the arguments and "remonstrations" against her decision because "all over India, at this very moment, widows in white saris are bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws. Doves with

cut-off wings." In the figure of Sumita, Divakaruni also highlights the immigrant experience of Indian women. Coming from a conservative Bengali family, she is scared to leave her parents and migrate to a distant foreign land. But she observes that, ironically, her life in America hasn't turned out to be much different from her friends living in India because when her mother-in-law's friends visit, she must cover her head and serve them tea; she cannot address her husband using his name and she is not even allowed to visit his store. Another motif in this collection of stories is that how Indian women view the sexual aspect of their marriage as mere "wifely duty". Sumita, who has lived a sheltered life, is advised by her married and pregnant friend Madhavi to "think about something else" or bite her tongue hard when performing "wifely duty" on her wedding night.

The story 'Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs' addresses the issue of racism in America. The convent educated Jayanti, the daughter of an aristocratic Bengali family, has formed a notion of America based on the pictures she has seen in "*Good Housekeeping* and *Sunset* at the USIS library". But she receives a rude shock when four young boys in Chicago call her and Aunt Pratima "nigger" and throw dirty slush at them. Jayanti wonders how the boys fail to see that she is not black, but brown. Divakaruni shows how racist hate views all people of color as the 'other' without appreciating their diverse ethnicity, and forcibly imposes a uniform pejorative identity on them. We also learn that the surly Uncle Bikram has been a victim of racism when some Chicago locals had viciously attacked him and burned down his shop. He says, "The Americans hate us. They're always putting us down because we're dark-skinned foreigners, *kala admi*. Blaming us for the damn economy, for taking away their jobs." The story also shows how living in America doesn't bring about much change in the gender dynamics. Pratima was married off to Bikram because a matchmaker had promised her family that he was a wealthy owner of an automobile company in America. But he is actually a car mechanic in a "dingy garage" in Chicago. Pratima is a nervous woman who rarely leaves home and spends most of her time in the kitchen. When Jayanti watches her dutifully pouring a serving of dal onto Bikram's plate, she has a "strange sense of disorientation", as if she hasn't left Kolkata at all. There is also a point in the story where Bikram directs his impotent rage against the discriminatory racist culture towards Pratima and slaps her. But he is immediately repentant and breaks down. Pratima, rather than being angry, consoles him like a child.

In 'The Word Love' Divakaruni portrays a complex mother-daughter relationship. She shows how it is important to outgrow the need for parental approval and carve out a strong self-identity. The narrator is an Indian woman living in America with her boyfriend Rex. Her fixation on her mother is to the extent that she feels guilty and depressed about sleeping with Rex even though she loves him, because she knows her conservative mother would never approve of "living in sin". When her mother comes to know about it, she disowns her completely. The narrator is on the verge of committing suicide but, towards the end of the story, she resolves to love and live for herself. Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) points out, "The mother is the early caregiver and primary source of identification for all children... A daughter continues to identify with the mother." The narrator's boyfriend rightly comments that she had been unable to cut the "umbilical cord". She struggles with her desire for personal autonomy and, sometimes, tries to assert her will by doing something outrageous. She reminisces watching a popular Hindi film with her friends, knowing well that her mother would disapprove. She is discreet about her affair with Rex, but, at the same time, a tiny rebel part of her wants her mother to know. Ultimately, it's the crisis of total rejection that pushes her on the path of self-love.

In 'A Perfect Life' Divakaruni employs the myth of the Indian god Krishna and his foster mother, Yashoda. The narrator, Meera has a "perfect", "civilized" and "much in control life". She has a successful career, dresses in expensive brands like Yves St. Laurent, and lives contentedly with her boyfriend, Richard, in California. She is not keen on becoming a mother. She says that in Indian marriages "becoming a wife was only the prelude to that all-important, all-consuming event—becoming a mother." She reasons that she was not against marriage or having a child. She "just wanted to make sure that when it happened, it would be on my own terms, because I wanted it." She observes how women become frumpy and intellectually diminished after having a child, constantly discussing "colic and teething pains and Dr. Spock's views on bed-wetting." All of this change when one day she rescues an abused, seven-year-old boy, who she names Krishna. She finds him hiding below her apartment, and observing how terrified he is, takes him in. The story doesn't reveal much about Krishna's background, but Meera sees painful cigarette marks on his back. Her maternal instincts are aroused, and she acts like a foster mother to him, as Yashoda was to Krishna in the Indian mythology. Her life is perfect no more - she drives late to work; risks losing her best employee award and stops caring much about Richard. But tragedy strikes as she eventually loses Krishna because of the stringent Californian adoption laws. When, later, she marries Richard, she decides not to have children of her own, as she has still not recovered from the emotional pain of losing Krishna. The story foregrounds the maternal instincts of a woman. Furthermore, as all the other stories in this collection, 'A Perfect Life' reveals the gap between the American and the Indian culture. Meera finds Richard much more attractive than Indian men. She describes him as "Tall and lean and sophisticated, he was very different from the Indian men I'd known back home...." He was passionate "without getting possessive" and gave her "space". On the other hand, the photos of the eligible bachelors that her mother sent her were all prosaic, "mustachioed men in stiff-collared shirts with slicked-back Brylcreem hair."

'The Maid Servant's Story' is a poignant tale about a young woman who is pushed into prostitution. Divakaruni employs the technique of story- within – story where the frame story is about Manisha and her mother. Her aunt, Deepa Mashi, tells her about Sarala, a maid servant employed by her mother when she was pregnant. Sarala took shelter with Manisha's mother because she was being sexually exploited by her own family. She was a dutiful and simple girl. Manisha's mother and Sarala formed a sisterly bond, and the mother even taught her to read and write. But Manisha's father, a suave, successful bank employee, tried to coerce Sarala to sleep with him. When she refused, he sent her back to her family, and later, she becomes a prostitute. The ugliest side of patriarchy is shown in this story. The husband, a man bound by the vows of loyalty, tries to force sexual relations with an unwilling woman, and yet, patriarchy gives him the prerogative to label her a "whore". A shame that is his is conveniently transferred to the woman. Commenting upon the dehumanization that a prostitute experiences, Andrea Dworkin in 'Prostitution and Male Supremacy' (1993) writes, "the prostituted woman is seen as the generative source of everything that is bad and wrong and rotten with sex, with the man, with women. She is seen as someone who is deserving of punishment, not just because of what she does...but because of what she is." Manisha wonders why her mother is so cold and distant, but later, she realises that it is because she was aware of her husband's infidelity and the tragic fate of Sarala.

In 'The Disappearance', the narrative point of view is that of a husband whose wife has suddenly disappeared while taking one of her evening walks. The wife doesn't relate her

own story. We learn about her through the husband's reminiscences. The story subtly reveals the casual misogyny of the husband. He is no brutish wife-beater, neither does he cheat. In fact, he likes to consider himself an "honest man" and a "good husband". But a discerning reader can perceive the deeply ingrained prejudice that he holds against women. While selecting a bride for himself, he had demanded a "quiet, pretty girl"; not the "brash" Calcutta girls with "too many Western ideas", someone who would "be relieved to have her husband make the major decisions." He believes he has been generous when he lets her choose the kitchen tiles, or go to the Yosemite park instead of Reno. But he puts his foot down when she wants to take up a job, or study further or wear western clothes. He also takes pride in never hurting her during sex. She is mostly unwilling to be intimate, but he forces her, believing it to be his right as a husband- "That was another area where he'd had to be firm. Sex. She was always saying, Please, not tonight, I don't feel up to it." Later in the story, the husband realizes that his wife has not been kidnapped but has deliberately left him. The irony is that he genuinely believes he has given her no reason to be unhappy. Divakaruni astutely shows how men brought up in a patriarchal mindset are blissfully unaware of their deeply entrenched sexism and misogyny. He had tried to control every aspect of her life, had never treated her as an equal while making decisions and had even refused to respect her disinclination for sexual intimacy. Yet he blames her for abandoning him and firmly believes that he has been the aggrieved party. And he learns no lesson. In choosing a second wife, he looks for an undereducated, "simple girl, maybe from their ancestral village. Someone whose family wasn't well off, who would be suitably appreciative of the comforts he could provide."

'Doors' is a story about a married couple, Preeti and Deepak. Preeti is a single child to her parents and has lived in America since she was twelve. Deepak had lived in India in a large joint family since childhood, and had later migrated to Berkeley. The story mainly highlights the tension that is caused by Preeti's need for privacy and Deepak's inability to fully understand that need. As many of Divakaruni's stories, 'Doors' shows how the Indians who live in America assimilate some aspects of the 'modern' culture and become fundamentally different, at least in some ways, from the 'traditional' Indians. Preeti and Deepak love each other and believe that their different upbringings will not cause any serious problem. Both had been warned by their friends and family. Preeti's mother tells her that it will never work because Deepak is "straight out of India", with a set of "prehistoric values". Deepak's friends are blatantly chauvinistic when they advise him to settle with a woman who is not "too educated, brought up to treat a man right and not talk back...." Nevertheless, they get married and adjust well. But sometimes, Deepak is bothered by Preeti's obsessive habit of locking doors. She locks the bedroom at night even though they are only two of them living in the house. She locks the bathroom, the garden door and the door to her study room. On the other hand, Deepak doesn't even lock the bathroom while he is in the shower. The story foregrounds the subtle cultural barriers that one confronts while moving from India to America. Divakaruni, a part of the Indian diaspora in America, knows that it is not a simple transition from the Indian to the American way of life. Preeti values privacy and personal space. Deepak loves Preeti but, because he has been brought up in a different environment, is unable to fully comprehend her need for privacy. Their marriage crumbles when his loud and intrusive cousin, Raj, comes to live with them. His utter disregard for Preeti's personal space seems like an assault to her. She tries to communicate her misery to Deepak, but is surprised when he blames her for not making an effort to like Raj. She realises that Deepak has

changed under Raj's influence, or, more appropriately, he has reverted to his former self. He takes time off work, listens to loud Bollywood music, and is pleased when Raj reminds him how he used to be a "street-corner Romeo". He shows utter disregard for Preeti's feelings and calls her "paranoid". In the end, she decides to leave and move in with her friend, Cathy. Deepak then asks Raj to move out while blaming her all the while for not being "flexible". All of her mother's misgivings come true when Deepak tells her, "You can't leave. What would people say? Besides, you're my wife. You belong in my home." Divakaruni censures the patriarchal, misogynistic ethos of Indian men in the figure of Deepak. They might be educated and "enlightened", but when it comes to gender relations, they want to enjoy the privilege of owning women.

'The Ultrasound' addresses the issue of female infanticide in India. Anjali and Arundhati are cousins. Anjali has married Sunil and has emigrated to California, whereas, Arundhati is married to Ramesh and lives in the provincial town of Burdwan. Again, Divakaruni highlights the cultural differences between India and America. Sunil is a loving husband. He encourages Anjali to study further, prepares dinner when she has evening classes and keeps awake at night to calm her when she gets nervous before exams. Arundhati's life is quite the opposite. She lives in an ancestral house with her husband and in-laws. As the "eldest daughter-in-law of a large, traditional brahmin family", her whole life is centered upon cooking, cleaning and supervising the servants. Instead of a daughter-in-law, she is like a glorified servant. The crisis in the story comes when both Anjali and Arundhati are pregnant and the results of their amniocentesis tests come. Anjali is pregnant with a boy and Arundhati is going to have a girl. Arundhati's family demands an abortion because "it's not fitting that the eldest child of the Bhattacharjee household should be a female." She is distraught but shows incredible strength when she decides to run away instead of agreeing to kill her baby. In the male-dominated Indian society, female infanticide has been a common practice. Boys are considered as carriers of the family name, whereas, girls are seen as a burden. Even women, like Arundhati's mother-in-law, are willing participants in this heinous crime against their own sex. As Sunil opines, "It's a man's world in India." Arundhati has nowhere to go if she chooses to leave her husband. She will be treated as a social pariah. Compared to her, Anjali is grateful that she has love, safety and freedom in her life. But there are certain uncomfortable issues that she must also confront. She is worried that Sunil's family might not be happy if she has a girl. She wonders whether Sunil's love and care are only because she is pregnant with his child. Once, while she was arguing with Sunil, he reminded her to have a "reality check" and to be "grateful" for her life. Divakaruni shows how married Indian women are at the mercy of their husbands and in-laws. Interestingly, in the figure of Anjali's mother-who has been given a very small space in the story - we see a woman who has broken out of the traditional mold. After her husband's death, she had taken over the family business, running a bookstore in a "prime College Street location, and surprised everyone by managing it with shrewd efficiency". Because of her courage and determination, she had been able to give Anjali a good education and a comfortable life. On the other hand, Arundhati's mother also loses her husband. Like "most genteel Bengali widows", she struggles to make ends meet. But unlike Anjali's mother, she has no wish to be independent and give her daughter a better life. Arundhati never has enough dresses, she is never encouraged to perform well in studies, takes up Home Science in college and learns knitting and cooking. Even when she is in a desperate situation, her mother refuses to give her shelter, and advises her to stick with her in-laws, for better or for worse.

'Affair' is a story about the crumbling marriage of two couples living in America - Abha and Ashok, and Meena and Srikant. It highlights two issues- the failure of the traditional arranged marriage, and the self-assertion of Abha and Meena. Although Ashok is married to Abha, in appearance and in personality, he is more suited to Meena. The same is the case with Meena and Srikant. Both Abha and Srikant are darker, reserved and intense individuals, whereas, their better halves are flamboyant, glamorous and witty people. But in arranged marriages, horoscope matches are more important than personality matches. Abha was married to Ashok because their horoscope matched perfectly. The root cause of trouble in their marriage is their sexual incompatibility. As Ashok comments, Abha suffers from her "prudish Indian upbringing". As many other women in this collection of stories, she believes that sexual intimacy is merely a duty to please her husband and to have children. Ashok wants to explore, but she is aghast when he brings home an explicit book or watches racy videos on the television. Ashok masks his resentment by directing his "acid humor" at her. Like them, Meena and Srikant also have personality clashes. Meena feels very lonely when Srikant is on a trip or busy working. She turns on the TV in order to avoid the silence and loneliness. She is an insomniac and loses sleep over little things. She also had a painful miscarriage. Srikant is a good man, but he doesn't understand her well. She starts an affair with her coworker, Charles. She tells Abha that there was nothing left in her marriage- "I felt I was slowly drying up inside, my blood turning to dust." About Charles, she says he made her feel "special". He "understood all the things I wanted out of life—he wanted the same things. With him I didn't feel greedy or guilty or ashamed." Interestingly, Abha had been distressed thinking that Meena is having an affair with Ashok. But when she learns the reality - that Ashok has been faithful - she begins to recognize the rot in her own marriage. She realizes that they have both been unhappy for a long time, and harbor resentment against each other. She decides to free both herself and Ashok from spiraling towards "hate" and "hopelessness". She prepares to leave, find a job and live on her own. Abha and Meena are aware of the social stigma that they would have to face, but they are determined to give themselves a second chance at happiness.

'Meeting Mrinal' is a moving account of Asha and her "precious, imperfect" life. The underlying theme of the story is that "perfect life is only an illusion". After her husband, Mahesh, divorced her, Asha lives in San Francisco with her son, Dinesh. She has spent years caring for her family. But when the family disintegrates, she tries to carve out an identity for herself by taking up classes in library science which, she hopes, will give her a job one day, and doing some exercises to take care of her appearance. Her friend, Mrinal, has a very different life than hers, though they both grew up together. Mrinal chose her career over marriage. Both of them speculate that the other has an idyllic life. But Divakaruni shows that neither the married and divorced Asha nor the glamorous, ambitious but ultimately lonely, Mrinal has a perfect life. Asha ruminates how hard she has "always tried to be the perfect wife and mother, like the heroines of mythology I grew up on—patient, faithful Sita, selfless Kunti." It strikes her that perhaps Mahesh also "fled from us because he wanted a last chance to be the virile Arjun, the mighty Bhim." This fascinating use of Indian mythology, comparing the exemplary characters of Ramayana and Mahabharata to the deeply flawed, real life people, shows that perfection is only a mirage.

In *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni portrays many facets of women's lives. Its canvas presents a whole gamut of female characters. However, there is no depiction of sapphism. These stories do not voice the concern of the numerous homoerotic women trapped in a

conventional, heterosexual marriage. There's also an underlying subtext that the Indian society is orthodox and restricting, whereas the American culture is progressive and liberating. But both pose their own challenge to the female characters. In conclusion, Michel Foucault's assertion in *The Chomsky- Foucault Debate* seems adequate to encapsulate Divakaruni's purpose in writing these stories: "The real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the working of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them." As a feminist work of fiction by a South Asian woman writer, *Arranged Marriage* underscores the vicissitudes of Indian women's lives. It unravels the deep-seated sexism and misogyny that sustains a patriarchal society.

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